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### The Role of Community in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

**Abstract:** In the literary works of Toni Morrison, community feeling with the ritual of sharing, communal existence and acceptance serve to nurture and heal the wound of slavery or racism. Her works are highly acclaimed for its capability of nurturing young minds. Morrison is obliged to preserve the rights of women regardless of caste, class or community. The present article analyses the novel *Sula* within the framework of black feminism concentrating on the aspect of the role of community. It attempts to study how the experimental and independent life of Sula has disrupted her idea of defining herself and how it has affected her relationship with her close ones. The readers are invited to see what happens to those women who ignore the anticipated norms of a traditional lifestyle set by the

male dominated world. It also examines how her selfishness has distanced herself from the community of her small village Bottom. The article also studies the role and the contributions of Eva Peace of *Sula* towards their community.

Toni Morrison's literary works attempt to unfold "the plight of the female as well as male in the postcolonial Afro-American cultural ethos to reveal the psychological complexities and to interpret social behaviour." (Sengupta, 2006: 85) Her works are highly acclaimed for its capability of nurturing young minds. The present article analyses the novel *Sula* within the framework of black feminism concentrating on the aspect of the role of community. It attempts to study how the experimental and independent life of Sula has disrupted her idea of defining herself and how it has affected her relationship with her close ones. It also examines how her selfishness has distanced herself from the community of her small village Bottom. The article also studies the role and the contributions of Eva Peace of *Sula* towards their community.

Toni Morrison's *Sula* celebrates the lives of working people who works daily to earn their living. The novel is about the story of a community of a small village Bottom in Ohio and the friendship of two Afro-American women Sula Peace and Nel Wright. Bottom, the gregated community is created by the writer based on the towns of black community of the year 1919 to 1965.

In the imaginative town of Bottom, survival is treated as a serious business where everyone must work to feed themselves and survive in an alien world of whites. It is pathetic to learn that the only paid work available for black women is confined to either slavery for white families or prostitution. However, Eva Peace and Hannah Peace, the mother-daughter duo, unlike some black women find other means of business by helping their neighbours in harvesting vegetables and fruits besides the work of slavery and prostitution.

Talking about community, the presence of ancestors is one of the distinctive elements in Toni Morrison's works. The ancestors in her novels are not just parents or grand-parents but those people who are protective and instructive to the characters. The ancestors in her novels "enable the writer as an artist to expose her personal grief which becomes the community grief when shared with the readers whom she takes into confidence." (Sengupta, 2006: 123) Community plays a crucial role in her novel *Sula*. Through the characters of ancestors, Morrison is able to connect with her readers. For instance, the household description of Eva Peace, grandmother of the titular character Sula, is described in details in the section "1921" of the novel *Sula*:

Sula Peace lived in a house of many rooms that had been built over a period of five years to the specifications of its owner... more stairways-... rooms that had three doors,...this enormous house with the four sickle-pear trees in the front yard and the single elm in the back yard was Eva Peace, who sat in a wagon on the third floor directing the lives of her children,...

Whatever the fate of her lost leg, the remaining one was magnificent. It was stockinged and shod at all times and in all weather... One of her men friends had fashioned a kind of wheelchair for her... They all had the impression that they were looking up at her, up into the open distances of her eyes, up into the soft black of her nostrils and up at the crest of her chin. (Morrison, 2005: 30 -31)

It can be said that the character of Eva Peace is like the one who has divine power, who, like the creator owns a big house of number of rooms and beautiful garden at backyard and front yard. Such a description gives her reader a ride to the Garden of Eden. The four sickle pear trees in her front yard signify a dominant world while elm in her backyard signifies singleness or loneliness.

Though Eva Peace seems to be confined to her house, she is not really isolated from her society but she is too busy with her household activity including taking care of her children and friends in her house. Eva's loneliness signifies a wholeness that can draw her neighbours and friends towards her rather than becoming a burden to them. Barbara Christian's reading of Eva's character represents as "a powerful matriarch rather than a 'castrated' usurper of mphallic power." (qtd. in Sengupta, 2006: 125) Christian claims that Eva can give and end life when she kills her own son Plum. To her, it was her responsibility as a mother "to release him from his worthless ineffectual existence later on." (Sengupta, 2006: 126) To observe

Eva's feelings, the passages are quoted:

Sometime before the middle of December, the baby, Plum, stopped having bowel movements. Eva massaged his stomach and gave him warm water... He cried and fought so they couldn't get much down his throat anyway... At one point, maddened by his own crying, he gagged, choked and looked as though he was strangling to death... Softening the insertion with the dab of lard, she probed with her middle finger to loosen his bowels... Plum stopped crying as the black hard stools ricocheted onto the frozen ground. (Morrison, 2005: 33 – 34)

If Eva is a mother who can restore and take life of her children than Sethe in *Beloved* is also an ancestor who could take the life of her offspring only to save her from the trauma of slavery while Baby Suggs is someone who attempted to bring the blacks together and the spread the message of community and love. Morrison portrays these three mother characters in her novels as nurturers for the society. She opines that the community serves both as a "support system and a hammer at the same time." (Sengupta, 2006: 129) Because, to survive, one needs to rely on one another and one needs to work collectively. In *Sula*, the people of Bottom work

collectively to protect themselves from the malevolence of the village witch to maintain a communal life and peaceful society.

I attempt to study how the experimental and independent life of Sula has affected and disrupted her life. Sula is portrayed as a bold, strong and powerful character by Morrison in the novel *Sula*. She creates a strong feminine identity in the character of Sula. She is an independent young woman living the life of big city in her small village Bottom that made her isolate from her own community. She is outcast by her society for refusing to fit in the traditional black society where women are expected to behave like a “perfect” woman, daughter, mother, sister or wife. She rebels against the idea of a good woman and ignores the anticipated norms of a traditional lifestyle set by the male dominated world. The community of Bottom judges her aberrant act of sending her grandmother Eva at an old age home and betraying her closest friend Nel Wright by involving with her husband Jude sexually. Morrison explains the dilemma of Sula Peace in the section “1939” of the novel:

Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous. (Morrison, 2005: 121)

Unfortunately, Sula could never realise how much her selfish acts have hurt her close ones. It did not bring her anything except for emptiness in her life that she starts to use men with bitterness to spice up her meaningless and purposeless life. This leads her community to despise her even more. Sula has become an outcast to her own community due to her lifestyle and unforgivable acts. According to her friend Nel, Sula is living the life of men, free and independent:

“You can’t have it all, Sula.” ...

“Why? I can do it all, why can’t I have it all?”

“You *can’t* do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can’t act like a man. You can’t be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don’t.” (Morrison, 2005: 142)

Here, Nel tries to remind her once loving friend Sula of her isolation from the community of Bottom “as the price of her independence.” (Marie, 1998: 731) Sula denies Nel’s concept of dependent woman or a wife. Nel is opposite to the character of Sula who strongly believes that it is the duty of black women to be dependent to their husbands and that black women can never be independent like men.

Sula, throughout her life, have refused to accept a boring life prescribed by whites or other black people. She was too stubborn to define herself in her community and in her despite bid to set a standard by placing herself outside her own community, she became isolated. In her journey of making herself, she not only hurt herself but all those people who were close to her.

In the literary works of Toni Morrison, community feeling with the ritual of sharing, communal existence and acceptance serve to nurture and heal the wound of slavery or racism. Morrison is obliged to preserve the rights of women regardless of caste, class or community. She strongly opposes to the concept of destruction. Instead she desires to maintain peace among the black community.

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